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Lord Roberts in war;



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LORD ROBERTS IN WAR

THE FOLLOWING BOOKS WILL SHORTLY
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INDIA'S SCIENTIFIC FRONTIER
—WHAT IS IT? and WHERE
IS IT? By COLONEL H. B. HANNA

Also at the end of the year

The first volume of the HISTORY OF
THE AFGHAN WAR By COLONEL
H. B. HANNA

Rough Sketch
illustrating
Operations before Kabul
in December 1879 and
Action on December 11th

MIR KAREZ

Macpherson's Brigade on morning of 11th December
1500 Infantry & Mountain Gms

10 miles



2½ Squadrons
4 Gms RHA

Nassy's force on morning
of 11th December

Sherepur Cantonments
December 14th to 23rd by
hosted from
60,000 tribesmen

BUTKAK

Gough's Position 23rd December

Road to India

Mahomed Jans Force
on morning of 11th December 10,000 men

RIVER KABUL

KILLA KAZI

26 Miles

MAIDAN

Baker's Brigade on morning of 11th December
900 Infantry 2½ Squadrons and 4 Gms

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C.W. 15

LORD ROBERTS IN WAR

A STUDY FOR
THE DAY

Audi Alteram Partem

BY
COLONEL H. B. HANNA B.S.C
= LATE COMMANDING AT DELHI, AUTHOR OF
"CAN RUSSIA INVADE INDIA?"



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LORD ROBERTS IN WAR

ERRATUM.

Page 45, for 1878 read 1879.

Page 54, for 1879 read 1880.

Page 58, for 1890 read 1880.

the foremost place in public estimation, there

¹ Even if we retire next cold season, the cost of the campaign will probably be nearer five than two millions.

LORD ROBERTS IN WAR

THE future of Chitral is undoubtedly the question of the hour. Whether it shall be permanently occupied, or whether the British Government shall compel the Indian Government to rest satisfied with having vindicated its ability to march thither, at its pleasure and the moderate cost of two millions sterling,¹ must depend largely upon the tone of feeling on the subject, at home and in India, during the next few weeks. That tone of feeling will, of course, reflect the views of those to whom the majority of Englishmen chance to look for guidance in such matters ; and as, among the soldiers whose reputation has been made in India, Lord Roberts has of late years occupied the foremost place in public estimation, there

¹ Even if we retire next cold season, the cost of the campaign will probably be nearer five than two millions.

seems every probability of *his* being the views reflected, unless that majority can be made to see that even as regards the military aspects of this last development of the so-called "forward" policy in Indian frontier affairs, our latest Field Marshal is neither a safe nor a consistent guide.

If Lord Roberts were a peaceful veteran resting on his laurels, it would be a cruel and wanton act to disturb him in their possession ; but he is a living force to-day, working and fighting in our midst ; and he will have no right to complain if those who abhor the militant policy of which he is the champion, try to lessen his power for evil by showing that his great reputation rests on very narrow foundations.

Lord Roberts' career, so far as it is necessary to retrace it for the purpose I have in view, begins with the second Afghan war. Into the causes of that war, and the question whether it was a just or an unjust one, there is no necessity to enter. These are controversial matters on which men may, and do, differ widely ; but

on one point there can be no two opinions: namely, that as soon as it was evident that a rupture with Afghanistan was likely to occur—and that it must occur sooner or later was a fore-gone conclusion from the hour of Lord Lytton's landing in Calcutta with Lord Salisbury's confidential instructions in his despatch box—it became the first duty of the military authorities to be prepared for hostilities, come when they might; and on no one man was that duty more incumbent than on Colonel (local Major-General) F. Roberts, Quarter-Master-General in India, since the department of which he was the chief has under its control all arrangements connected with Intelligence, Transport, Camp-followers, Camp-equipage, Movements of Troops, and Plan of Operations.

How was this duty fulfilled? When, on the 21st September, 1878, Sir Neville Chamberlain's Mission was turned back at Ali Musjid, and the Viceroy sent to the Amir an ultimatum, fixing the 21st November as the day on which he must

yield to all the British demands, or see British armies cross his frontier, were our troops ready to take the field ?

As regards Intelligence, there was no map ready for distribution to officers, not one in a hundred of whom knew anything about the country they were about to invade, for the only source of knowledge on the subject, Sir Charles Macgregor's Gazetteer, was a sealed book to the service at large ; only a limited number of copies had been printed, and these, marked "Confidential," were kept carefully under lock and key ! At the eleventh hour a few officers were, indeed, told off to copy from it certain useful passages ; but the troops were well on their way to Kandahar, Jellalabad, and Kuram before they had finished their task, and it is a fact that at least one commander of a division began and ended his campaign without ever having had either map or extracts in his possession.

The Transport Service was, from the beginning of the war, bad in itself, badly equipped, and

utterly inadequate; and the consequent loss of baggage animals so enormous as at times almost to threaten to bring the campaign to a standstill.

There was no proper shelter provided for the half-clothed camp-followers, who were dragged from their homes in the sunny plains of India to die by thousands of fever and pneumonia among the snows of Afghanistan.

It is difficult to compute the amount of suffering, mortality, and expense which must be laid to the door of the department over which Colonel Roberts had presided for nearly five years before the outbreak of the second Afghan war, from these two causes alone—defective transport and indifference to the needs of the unhappy men without whose services our armies could not have advanced a single step.

Then as to Movement of Troops: early in 1878 it was obvious to every one in India that we were fast drifting into war with the Amir of Afghanistan, and yet no steps were taken to reinforce the weak and isolated post of Quetta;

and it was not until the British Mission was turned back at Ali Musjid, that the Government and its military advisers appear to have realized that the little garrison was in imminent peril. Then European and native troops were hurriedly despatched from Mooltan, *via* Dera Ghazi Khan, Rajunpoor, the Dera Bugti route, and the Bolan Pass—a trying march at any season, but terrible in September and October; and here again, as in the matter of transport, the shortsightedness and dilatoriness of the military authorities, of whom Colonel Roberts was the staff officer most responsible, entailed immense suffering on troops, camp-followers, and baggage animals, and much unnecessary expenditure of money; whereas, if reinforcements had been sent up before the hot weather set in, they would have reached their destination in comparative comfort, and there need never have been a moment's anxiety for the safety of Quetta.

And what can I say of the Plan of Campaign, which was elaborated by Lord Lytton and his

military advisers, except that it was the very worst that could have been adopted, as it trebled the cost of the war, whilst dividing by three the power of our troops to bring it to a speedy conclusion. Three armies were sent into the field, each army weak in itself, having a long and difficult line of communications to keep open, and not one of the three being able to render the slightest assistance to either of the other two!¹ The reason assigned by Lord Lytton for the adoption of this remarkable plan of operations—viz., that it compelled the Amir to divide his forces—shows a total ignorance of the science of war, the discredit of which must fall chiefly on the Viceroy's advisers. The division of an enemy's forces ought not for a moment to be weighed against the advantage of concentrating one's own; and this rule was of double strength and validity in this particular instance, where the division of Shere Ali's forces meant an enormous increase of his power, by calling to

¹ Sir Frederick Haines, the Commander-in-Chief, was not, I believe, consulted in regard to the Plan of Campaign.

arms a host of outraged and indignant tribesmen, two-thirds of whom would have stayed quietly at home if Afghanistan had been invaded by one road only.

However, three lines of invasion meant three armies, and three armies meant three commanders, of whom Colonel Roberts, promoted to Major-General, and seconded in his duties as Quarter-Master-General, was one. He, Colley, and Lumsden were the men who had taught Lord Lytton to believe that with the Kuram Valley up to the top of the Shutargurdan Pass in his hands, he could dominate Kabul and Ghuzni ; it was natural, therefore, that the command of the division which entered Afghanistan by the Kuram route should have been the one allotted to Roberts. Of that route a year and a half later he wrote in the following terms : " From a political standpoint the Kuram route possesses no marked advantages. It is, as it were, but a by-road to Kabul or Ghuzni, and its possession does not place us in a position of

vantage with regard to the tribes whose districts it skirts." Experience, it will be said, had opened General Roberts' eyes. True; but as Quarter-Master-General, with all means of information at hand, his eyes ought not to have needed opening. Was not Dr. Bellew at Simla?—Dr. Bellew, who had traversed this road more than once,—and had he not described it as "a perfect *cul de sac* in the hills, hemmed in by a number of turbulent robber-tribes, who are under no control, and acknowledge no authority. . . . In it we should run the risk of being hemmed in by our foes in the overhanging hills around, of being cut off from our communications with the garrison at Kohat by the Orakzais on the one side, by the Waziris on the other. . . . With the Kuram in our possession, we certainly could not flank either the Khyber or the Gomal Pass, because between it and the one intervenes the impassable snowy range of Sufed Koh, and between it and the other intervenes the vast routeless, hilly tract of the Waziris. From Kuram

we could neither command Kabul nor Ghuzni, because the route to either is by a several days' march, over stupendous hills and through tortuous defiles, in comparison with which the historical Khyber and Bolan Passes, or even the less widely known Gomal Pass, are as king's highways"?

And as regards the campaign itself, what testimony does it bear to General Roberts' claim to be regarded as a great general? From the hour when he crossed the Kuram River at Thal and entered Afghan territory, the movements of his columns displayed his ignorance of, or contempt for, universally accepted rules of war. Although possessing no reliable intelligence regarding the enemy, except that the British advance would be obstinately disputed, he pushed forward his division in small and isolated bodies, through a close country, admirably adapted for ambuscades. He met, indeed, with no opposition between Thal and the Kuram Forts; but again and again he gave opportunities which an

enterprising enemy would have used to his utter ruin. In his hurry to snatch a victory, he gave his tired troops no rest at the Kuram Forts ; but the very day after Thelwall's column marched in, he took his little force twenty-one miles over the roughest of tracks, and then hurled a handful of exhausted men against an almost impregnable position, defended by an enemy of whose strength he was entirely ignorant. In his despatches this extraordinary movement is described as a reconnaissance in force ; but since when is it the custom for a general to make a reconnaissance of any kind with all the troops at his disposal, and to order the commander of the leading column to attack and follow up the enemy whenever he fell in with him ; or to select a camping ground, as he did on that afternoon, directly under heights crowned by the enemy's guns ? That his little army was not completely destroyed, in the retreat that followed, was due entirely to the supineness of the Afghans ; for in the gathering darkness, on

a wild, narrow path hemmed in by jungle, the retiring troops, mixed up inextricably with the advancing baggage animals and camp-followers, could have offered little organized resistance to a boldly executed attack.

Four days later the real battle of the Peiwar Kotal was fought and gained ; but who won it ? Not General Roberts, for he was miles away from the spot where the struggle was decided.

At ten o'clock on the night of the 1st of December, Roberts started with 2,263 troops of all ranks to storm the Spingawi Kotal, the extreme left of the enemy's position, and from thence to march on the heart of the enemy's position. Cobbe, with only 868 officers and men, remained behind to defend the camp, cover the communications with India, and deliver, the following morning, the front attack on the Peiwar Kotal. Toiling all night up the Spingawi nullah, the first part of the operation was successfully carried out at daybreak, when, with admirable gallantry, the 72nd Highlanders and the 5th Goorkhas captured

the sungas which defended the top of the pass; but no attack was made upon the Peiwar Kotal, no helping hand was held out to Cobbe, for the very good reason that the ridge along which General Roberts had counted on advancing was cleft in two by a deep ravine, which it was found impossible to traverse in the teeth of the fierce fire of the Afghans, who swarmed in the forest on its further side—a forest so dense that when, as the consequence of a lucky accident, General Roberts and his staff were at last able to cross the narrow neck of land, the possession of which had been so hotly contested, they were quickly convinced of the hopelessness of attempting to penetrate into its dark and tangled depths.

The lucky accident alluded to was brought about by the movements of the 5th Punjab Infantry, one of the two regiments left with Cobbe, which, in its ascent of the ridge to the right of the Peiwar Kotal, got separated from the 8th "King's" by the accidents of the ground, and hearing heavy firing above it, finally dissociated itself

from the front attack, in which it ought to have taken part, and joined the turning party. In doing this, its commanding officer, Major McQueen, caught, through an opening in the woods, a glimpse of the Afghan camp. Recognising the importance of this discovery, he at once hastened to communicate it to Roberts, who sent two guns to the spot indicated, the firing of which soon carried confusion and terror among the Afghan camp-followers and baggage animals. A panic ensued, which spread gradually to the troops opposing Roberts' advance, a portion of whom ceased firing and withdrew, leaving the ravine undefended.

As we have seen, this unexpected stroke of luck was of no use to the turning party, but it brought good fortune to the 400 men of the 8th "King's," who, gallantly led, first by General Cobbe and, after he had been wounded, by their own commanding officer, Colonel Barry-Drew, worked their way from spur to spur of the Peiwar Mountain, to a point whence they could pick off the

Afghan gunners on the summit of the pass. When the last of these lay dead beside his silent gun, Drew led his little band down into the Peiwar road, and placing himself at its head, dashed up to the Kotal, to find himself, at two o'clock in the afternoon, in possession of an abandoned camp, whence he had the satisfaction of sending the news of his success to General Roberts ; who, completely baffled in his attempt to reach the key of the Afghan position, was falling back on the Spingawi plateau in the very hour of his lieutenant's victory. From the Spingawi plateau the turning party descended into the Huriab Valley, with the object of getting into the enemy's rear ; but the utter exhaustion of the troops, who had been marching and fighting incessantly for eighteen consecutive hours, obliged it to bivouac about four o'clock in the afternoon, 9,400 feet above the level of the sea, in the bitter cold of a December night, without food, water, shelter, or warm clothing, and in total ignorance of the position of the enemy, and of

the fate which might in the meanwhile have overtaken the little band, on which so heavy a task had been imposed. This uncertainty must have been more painful to commander and men than the privations of their position, and the arrival of Barry-Drew's pencil note at eight p.m. would be an inexpressible relief to one and all.

The attack on the Peiwar was badly conceived, and rash in the extreme. The turning party, led by Roberts himself and amounting to nearly three-quarters of the whole of his force, abandoned its communications with India and with the remaining quarter, on which fell, as we have said, not only the heavy responsibility of covering the line of retreat in case of a reverse, but also the duty of delivering the front attack on a position of extraordinary strength. Even if Roberts had had double the number of troops, so that his communications with India on the one hand, and with Cobbe's little force on the other, could have been maintained, the distance to the Peiwar Kotal by the Spingawi Pass (about twelve

miles) was unreasonably long for a flank movement, especially in a country in which difficulty doubled distance.

And there was no real need to attack the Peiwar Kotal at all. Roberts' orders expressly forbade his advancing beyond the Shutargurdan. His duty was to hold the enemy's troops in play, and to keep them from reinforcing the defenders of the Khyber route. By breaking them up in the way he did, he simply drove them back upon Kabul. Had he halted at some well-chosen spot, possibly at the village of Peiwar, where there is a stretch of open ground, and drawn the Afghans on to attack him, as Sir Charles Gough so ably drew the Khugianis from their strong position on the hills above Futtehabad, the Afghan army would have been destroyed, not merely dispersed ; and few fugitives would have crossed the mountains to reinforce their comrades on the other side. But if he must needs attack, he should have, at least, waited till the reinforcements, which he knew to

be coming up, had joined him, and have used the interval in really careful reconnoitring, which would have saved him from the humiliation of having to fall back when he thought himself within striking distance of the enemy's main position.

If the action on the Peiwar Kotal reflects little credit on Roberts as a military leader, the subsequent raid into the Khost Valley has left a deep slur on his reputation as a statesman. The Khost Valley lies quite off the road to Kabul ; its inhabitants, practically independent tribes, had remained quietly in their villages and had not hampered our advance up the Kuram Valley, as they might have done, by attacking our long and unprotected line of communications. The Viceroy's proclamation had assured all the inhabitants of Afghanistan that the Indian Government had no quarrel with them, and that so long as they stayed peaceably in their homes, those homes should be safe from harm ; yet, for no reason, except a desire to find out whether

it would be possible to attack the Waziris by way of Khost, General Roberts broke into that country, and on the first sign of the very natural displeasure and alarm of its inhabitants—the mere fact of their assembling together in their villages—for there is no mention in the despatches of their having committed any so-called outrages on their invaders—he carried fire and sword through the land, from which, in the end, he had to retire in haste, glad to get his troops safely out of the hornets' nest which he had brought about his ears; for all the mountain tribes round about, roused to fierce anger by his cruel treatment of their neighbours, had flown to arms, and were threatening him on every side; whilst the Waziris, the weak point in whose line of defence he was trying to discover, as a direct consequence of his unsuccessful raid into Khost, made a very successful one into our own territories on the other side of the hills.¹

¹ See Sir George Campbell's undelivered speech on the Afghan Frontier—pages 48, 49 and 50. Edward Stanford, 55, Charing Cross, S.W.

There is one other matter in connection with this Khost expedition to which I must refer; namely, the dismissal of Mr. Malcolm Macpherson, the Special Correspondent of the *Standard*, for having in his letters exposed and severely criticised the manner in which it had been undertaken and conducted. This incident throws an instructive light upon General Roberts' high-handed conduct, his aversion to the expression of any independent opinion on his doings, and his disobedience to the rules of the service to which he belonged, when those rules were opposed to his interests or his inclinations. It is impossible to go into the details of the correspondence between the general and his critic, which was published *in extenso* by the latter; but the last letter written by Mr. Macpherson is well worthy of reproduction:—

“On the whole, Sir, I am not sorry that my connection with the Kuram Field Force has come to an end. I have been over and over again disgusted with the way in which my tele-

grams were treated, and with the extraordinary violation, which was permitted by Major-General Roberts, of the rule, referred to recently in the House of Commons, prohibiting staff officers from acting as press correspondents. Before I received the order to retire, at least three of the London daily newspapers and the principal Indian newspapers were deriving their information about the Kuram Field Force from members of Major-General Roberts' own staff; and so eager, apparently, was he to have the whole of the London daily press in his power, that even before the only independent correspondent with the Force had been formally dismissed, he had 'appointed' (I use his own expression) Captain Pretyman, his own aide-de-camp, to act in future as the *Standard's* correspondent. Nothing unpleasant about the Kuram Field Force can now be published; and however soothing such a state of matters may be to Major-General Roberts, I cannot but regard it as a grave public scandal."

After the Gandamak treaty had been signed, General Roberts proceeded to Simla, but he was destined soon to take the field again. Early in September his Division in the Kuram was under orders for Kabul, to avenge the massacre of the British envoy, Sir Louis Cavagnari. The inefficient state of the transport rendered the operation a very difficult one; but with his usual energy General Roberts pressed steadily on, his leading brigade under Baker fighting the battle of Charasiah by the way, and on the 9th of October entered Kabul, unopposed. Having established his little army at Sherpur, the Afghan cantonments constructed by Shere Ali for his troops only a short time before his flight from his capital, he proceeded to appoint a Commission to try the instigators and perpetrators of the murder of Cavagnari and his party. No exception can be taken to the powers of this Commission so far as they were conferred for this purpose, but the obligation laid upon it to pass sentence of death on any Afghan who

could be proved guilty of having offered armed resistance to our advance on Kabul, was as im-politic as it was cruel ; for where all had been more or less concerned in opposing the invaders of their country, the order carried to every mind a deep sense of personal insecurity. The almost daily executions which followed, though intended to strike terror into the hearts of the people, only succeeded in filling them with a burning desire for revenge. Another cause increased this feeling. Far and wide detachments of General Roberts' force scoured the country, sweeping into cantonments the stores of grain which had been laid in by the people for winter consumption. Liberal payment was, indeed, offered in the first instance; but when, as frequently happened, the villagers refused to part with food that they needed for themselves, troops were sent against them, and, to use the words of an officer belonging to one of Baker's foraging parties, in speaking of Bahadar Khan's villages, "We destroyed them all, and

left the valley full of smoking ruins and blazing stacks."

The natural consequences of such barbarous proceedings were not slow to follow. Alarming rumours of large tribal gatherings in the immediate neighbourhood of Kabul began to be reported, and on the 8th December General Roberts determined to take the field. As usual, he began his operations by scattering his troops broadcast over the district, courting disaster from every quarter. On the afternoon of the 8th December, General Macpherson's Brigade occupied the village of Aushur, about three miles west of Sherpur. On the 9th he halted, and employed the day in reconnoitring. On the same day Baker's Brigade marched to Maidan, a place lying about twenty-six miles south-west of Sherpur. On the 10th Macpherson was directed by Roberts to leave the principal part of his cavalry and his four guns Royal Horse Artillery at Aushur, and proceed with his infantry and mountain guns to the village of Mir Karez,

situated about ten miles north-west of Sherpur, for the purpose of dispersing a large gathering of tribesmen whom his reconnaissance of the 9th had discovered. Macpherson successfully attacked and defeated the Kohistanis, and bivouacked for the night. In the meantime the cavalry which he had left at the village of Aushur were reinforced, which brought the force up to three weak squadrons of cavalry and four Horse Artillery guns, General Massy being sent from cantonments to command them.

I must now trouble the reader, with the aid of the attached sketch, to examine the dispositions of the Kabul Field Force. On the 11th December, 1879, Macpherson is ten miles north-west, and Baker twenty-six miles south-west of Sherpur. If you draw a line from Macpherson to Sherpur, join Sherpur with Baker, and Baker with Macpherson, you will have nearly a right-angled triangle, the hypotenuse of which is the distance between Baker and Macpherson, about twenty-seven miles as the crow flies. Now join

Massy with Sherpur, and you will find that this line, three miles long, bisects the right angle. The country lying between Macpherson and Baker was of a rugged, hilly nature, quite impracticable for wheeled carriage. Massy was in the Chardeh Valley, which was open, but much cut up by water-courses. Separating Massy from Macpherson was a high range of hills, only passable at certain points. About two miles on Massy's left lay the road to Maidan and Ghuzni. The Sherpur cantonments, with a perimeter of more than four miles, in a most defenceless condition, and containing all our sick, wounded, spare transport, commissariat stores and ammunition, had been most dangerously denuded of troops; but Hugh Gough, a brave and experienced soldier, was in command—a fortunate circumstance, as subsequent events showed.

Meantime, Mahomed Jan, the ablest of the Afghan leaders, with 10,000 men at his back, lay hidden among the hills which separated Baker from Macpherson, an unsuspected spectator of these extraordinary tactics. On the morning of

the 11th December, seeing that Roberts' force was sufficiently scattered for his purpose, and Sherpur dangerously weakened, he secretly took up a strong position on the Maidan road, within eight miles of the British cantonments, thereby severing Baker's communications, and securing a point from which he could spring upon Sherpur.

At 9 o'clock on the morning of the 11th December, in obedience to General Roberts' orders, Massy, with his four Horse Artillery guns, two squadrons 9th Lancers, and one squadron 14th Bengal Cavalry, quite unconscious of the enemy's close proximity, moved towards the Maidan road. He had scarcely marched three miles, when his scouts, falling in with Jan Mahomed's advanced troops, were driven in on their main body. Massy, a gallant officer, did the best he could under the circumstances. He brought his guns quickly into action to try to hold the enemy in check, but without success. The steady advance of the tribesmen and their overwhelming numbers obliged him to give way. At that very moment Roberts rode up and

ordered the 9th Lancers to charge, supported by the squadron 14th Bengal Cavalry. A more spirited charge was never made. But what impression could 200 sabres make on a compact body of 10,000 determined men? By Roberts' directions the guns again came into action, and another charge was made, but to no purpose; the Afghans would not be denied. To be brief, Mahomed Jan swept everything before him, and captured the guns, which were afterwards gallantly recovered by Colonel C. M. MacGregor.¹ In the meantime Roberts, with commendable presence of mind, called up three companies of the 72nd Highlanders from Sherpur to occupy the Deh Masung defile, through which ran one of the roads to Sherpur, and on which the discomfited cavalry were retiring. The pass was safely reached by the fugitives; but the enemy continued to move steadily forward, till suddenly

¹ The credit of rallying the fugitives in this part of the field is due to Captain (now Colonel) T. Deane, who, with Lieutenant A. F. Liddell, R.H.A., and Mr. (now Sir Mortimer) Durand, accompanied MacGregor.

within a quarter of a mile of the British position, the left of Mahomed Jan's long deep line began strangely to waver, and, shortly after, his whole force took ground to the right, the huge column—that was the formation it had assumed—heading towards the high hills on the left of Deh Masung Pass, where General Roberts was anxiously watching its movements. To explain this sudden change in the enemy's tactics we must return to Macpherson at Mir Karez. On this momentous morning, rather more than an hour before Massy left Aushur, this fine soldier struck his camp, and, in accordance with Roberts' instructions, proceeded across the hills to join Baker; but before long the sound of Massy's guns reached him, and suspecting something wrong, he wheeled to the left, crossed the range of hills which bounds the north of the Chardeh Valley, and his skirmishers were soon engaged with the left rear of Mahomed Jan's army. But for Macpherson's opportune arrival, Sherpur must have fallen into the enemy's hands, for Roberts'

little force of between 400 and 500 men, half being cavalry, armed with carbines and without artillery, must have been swept away by sheer weight of numbers.¹

Such is a plain and unvarnished account of the proceedings which led up to the investment of Sherpur. The reverses of the 11th of December were due solely to General Roberts' strategic blunders, and Mahomed Jan's quickness in taking advantage of them; yet shortly afterwards telegrams appeared in the English and Indian papers attributing the disaster to General Macpherson. These untruthful statements were all the more galling to Macpherson as it was he who had saved the little body of cavalry, of which Roberts himself had assumed command, from total annihilation, and hindered the capture of Sherpur. How it was such damaging telegrams were published by the press has to this day never been explained; but no telegram, unless countersigned by General Roberts himself or

¹ The author was present at this action, and took part in the subsequent operations round Kabul, and in the defence of Sherpur.

one of his own staff officers, was allowed to leave Kabul. It was notorious that all press telegrams were carefully perused by Roberts, who, if the contents were not to his mind, would either call upon the correspondents to revise them, or would alter them himself. This fact is fully proved in the long correspondence between General Roberts and the Special Correspondent of the *Standard*, to which reference has already been made.

However these false reports about Macpherson may have originated, there is no doubt that General Roberts did try, and for the moment successfully, to shift the blame for this disaster from his own shoulders to those of General Massy; for in order to screen himself, and divert public attention from his blunders, General Roberts gave, in his official telegrams and despatches regarding the loss of the guns, so disingenuous an account of General Massy's proceedings, that that distinguished officer was, in the end, severely censured and removed from his command. I am quite aware that in writing

this I am bringing against Lord Roberts a charge so grave that only the amplest proof can justify it, but such proof is forthcoming.

The orders that Massy received from General Roberts have been published, and the manner in which he carried them out is a matter of history ; and any unbiassed person, carefully examining one and the other, cannot but be convinced that the former officer was not responsible for the fiasco. Massy was ordered—

(1) "To advance from Aushur by the road leading directly from the city of Kabul towards Arghandeh and Ghuzni" [the Maidan road].

(2) "To communicate with General Macpherson, and to act in conformity with that officer's movements."

(3) "To proceed cautiously and quietly, feeling for the enemy, but on no account to commit himself to an action until General Macpherson had engaged the enemy."

General Roberts, in referring to (1) order, says

in his despatches, "instead of gaining the Ghuzni road" [the Maidan road] "by the ordinary route, General Massy started across country, intending to strike that road beyond the village of Killa Kazi." The contention is vague and misleading ; for Massy, to gain the Maidan road from the village of Aushur, was obliged to start "across country." (*Vide* ; sketch.) The village of Aushur, it will be seen, is at its nearest point two miles from the Maidan road ; and Massy, who was bound, as far as possible, to obey the (2) order—"to communicate with General Macpherson," etc.—very properly moved diagonally across the Chardeh Valley, keeping nearly parallel with Macpherson, and thus acting "in conformity with that officer's movements." Had he struck the Maidan road at its nearest point, he would have turned his back on Macpherson, increased the interval between himself and that general by several miles, and hence reached the spot where he came into collision with the Afghan army at least an hour later,

by which time the whole of Macpherson's force would have passed the gap, by which alone it could debouche into the Chardeh Valley, and would have continued its march into the hills, quite unconscious of the extreme peril which was threatening not only General Massy and his cavalry, but also Roberts and Sherpur itself.

The (2) order given to Massy was really quite impracticable, since on the morning of the 11th he was nine miles from Macpherson, a high range of hills completely separating them. To maintain nine miles of lateral communications in a mountainous region, with a few weak squadrons of cavalry, and at the same time to advance in another direction, feeling cautiously for an enemy, every step taken still further increasing the difficulties of keeping up the communications, was an impossible task. Massy, anxious to comply with his instructions, did detach a troop of the 9th Lancers, regarding which General Roberts *naïvely* writes that "it

did not again join General Massy"! Of course not; and what better proof can there be that communications between the two forces could not be maintained?

That Massy *did* carefully feel for the enemy is fully demonstrated by the fact that on approaching Killa Kazi his advanced guard reported to him that the enemy were in considerable force on the hills flanking the Maidan road, some three miles in his front. Wishing, however, to ascertain, if possible, the nature and strength of the Afghan force, he continued his cautious advance—a decision in which he was fully justified, as his troops were composed entirely of cavalry and horse artillery, and the valley through which he was advancing, though rough, was practicable for those arms. But to read General Roberts' despatches, one might fancy that he expected Massy to turn tail and gallop back into Sherpur, leaving the enemy to follow up at his heels. That Mahomed Jan would have done so, there can be no doubt; for Massy had

only proceeded a short distance when the tribesmen streamed down into the plain to attack him, advancing towards him at a steady trot of some four or five miles an hour. Massy saw that the affair was going to be serious, and, acting like a good soldier, directed the horse artillery to open fire, "in order to check the enemy's advance, and detain them until he could hear something of Macpherson's column" (Roberts' Despatches). Had not Massy on that day brought his guns into action, a terrible disaster would have once again befallen the English in Afghanistan; for, as I have already said, but for the sound of those guns Macpherson would have passed on across the hills to meet Baker, where, entangled in a difficult country, he would have been beset on every side, while Sherpur, depleted of its troops, would have fallen an easy prey to Mahomed Jan.

As I have stated, it was just when it became clear that the guns could not keep back the Afghans, that General Roberts, with his staff,

rode up and assumed command of the troops ; and for all subsequent events, the two cavalry charges and the second advance of the guns, he alone must be held responsible. In the face of such facts, was it not cruel injustice to publicly censure and remove General Massy for a disaster which was entirely due to the rashness and lack of military knowledge of his superior officer ? Fortunately for Massy, the Duke of Cambridge, whose strong sense of justice has so often been exercised in righting individual wrongs, did not take the same view of the matter as the authorities in India, and Massy was soon re-appointed to a brigade.

Baker's position at Maidan was a very critical one. On the morning of the 11th December, in total ignorance of Mahomed Jan having interrupted his communications, he began leisurely to carry out his part of the programme, which was to advance towards Kabul to meet Macpherson, who would, so he expected, strike the Maidan road at Arghandeh. No news of Macpherson's

change of direction or of the disaster in the Chardeh Valley having reached him, Baker decided to halt at Arghandeh for the night. The next day, continuing his march, he succeeded in fighting his way to Sherpur; but Macpherson's Brigade, isolated and unsupported, was still at the Deh Masung Pass, the city and a high range of hills lying between it and Sherpur. On the 12th, 13th, and 14th, Roberts still further dispersed his small forces, in the vain attempt to dislodge Mahomed Jan's ever-increasing hordes of wild tribesmen from the Asmai heights, which overlook the city of Kabul and the Sherpur cantonments—a position especially favourable to an Afghan, who on a hillside is a formidable antagonist. The situation culminated on the 14th December in another signal disaster, one detachment being overwhelmed, with the loss of two mountain guns. This second defeat determined General Roberts "to withdraw from all *isolated positions*" [the italics are mine], "and to concentrate the whole force at Sherpur, *thus*

securing the safety of our large cantonments, and avoiding what had now become a useless sacrifice of life" (Roberts' Despatches). Baker's and other "isolated" detachments were soon safely within the cantonments, but Macpherson's Brigade only regained that shelter on the evening of the 14th, and, but for the courage and skill of the commander and the steadiness of the troops, it would assuredly have been cut off from Sherpur —a separation which would have had the most serious consequences, not only for itself, but also for the force within the cantonments, which would have been too weak to hold in check an enemy, computed by General Roberts to be 60,000 strong.

Sherpur, now closely invested, was in a most untenable condition. Hitherto no steps had been taken to put the place into a proper state of defence, although, early in November, Colonel Enæas Perkins, the commanding engineer, had submitted specifications and plans. Even after the reverse of the 11th of December, so con-

fident was Roberts of his ability to disperse the huge gathering of Afghans which hemmed him in, that nothing was done to render his position more secure. If during those days Mahomed Jan had only been aware of Sherpur's condition, he could have made short work of its garrison, which was out of all proportion small, compared to the size and strength of the fortifications it had to defend ; whilst numerous villages and enclosures close up to its wall would have afforded the necessary shelter in which to make his preparations for the attack.

The reader, remembering Khost and the ruined houses and blazing stacks of Bahadar Khan's villages, will be surprised to learn that General Roberts excused his supineness in demolishing buildings which threatened the safety of his cantonments, on the ground that he was "unwilling, by what might have appeared unnecessary harshness in the destruction of villages and orchards, to give rise to any ill-feeling on the part of the people of Kabul" (Roberts' Despatches).

The continued existence of these villages having become a question of life and death, General Roberts could no longer be guided by his humane feelings, and every available man in the garrison was set to work to put the Sherpur defences into proper order. Villages and walled enclosures, in dangerous proximity to the cantonments, were blown up or levelled ; the village of Bamaru and many detached buildings on the eastern and weakest face of Sherpur were loopholed and rendered defensible ; batteries were erected, and, where necessary, the place was still further fortified by ditch and breast works, while fruit trees were felled for abattis and dragged into their places, and wire entanglement was widely laid down. It is not necessary to enter here into the particulars of the siege, which lasted from the 14th to the 23rd December, 1878. It will be sufficient to say that during those ten days the troops, both British and Native, displayed the greatest alacrity and cheerfulness, and that no one set a finer example of

calm and confident courage than Sir Frederick Roberts himself.

Still the position was a very critical one, and the arrival of Sir Charles Gough, whom Roberts had summoned by telegraph, was eagerly looked for. The telegram which reached Gough at Jugdallak on the evening of the 14th ran as follows: "March to Kabul as soon as you can, and bring Latabund detachment with you. Hold on to all posts that are strong enough to resist attack, others I would withdraw from. It is very probable that the Gilzais will rise. We have had hard fighting, and have withdrawn our posts from neighbouring hills, and force is now collected at Sherpur, where we shall be more than a match for the enemy. They numbered nearly 30,000 to-day. *I will look out for you and assist you on road from Butkhak, or Latabund if possible.*" [The italics are mine.] "Try and keep me informed of your movements." To this telegram Gough replied: "Have just arrived at Jugdallak. Have only 500 men with me. Will advance as

soon as I possibly can." Shortly after this telegram was despatched and acknowledged, the wires were cut. On the 19th Roberts succeeded in sending the following heliogram to Colonel John Hudson¹ at Latabund, an isolated post between Kabul and Jugdallak: "Order Gough to advance without delay. This order is imperative, and must be obeyed. *There is no enemy to stop him.*"²

This message, which Hudson entrusted to the hands of an Afghan non-commissioned officer of his own regiment, reached Gough on the 20th December, and the same day that officer, having managed with much difficulty to scrape together about 1,500 men and 4 mountain guns, and relying on Roberts' assurances of co-operation, determined to advance the next morning to the relief of the beleaguered garrison. The resolu-

¹ The late Sir John Hudson, Commander-in-Chief of Bombay, who was recently killed by a fall from his horse, and whose death was an irreparable loss to the army.

² The italics are mine.

tion was a bold and gallant one, especially as General Bright, an officer of great experience, who commanded the line of communication, was quite opposed to the perilous attempt with such an inadequate force. He wished Gough to wait until more troops had been collected, and his opinion was unquestionably based on sound military grounds. Gough would have been perfectly justified in waiting for reinforcements. He had to traverse an exceptionally difficult country, inhabited by the powerful and hostile tribe of Gilzais. The distance was about sixty miles. For the first forty miles one dangerous pass succeeded another; and despite General Roberts' assurance that there was no enemy in the way, 60,000 Afghans lay between him and Sherpur. On the 22nd Gough reached Latabund safely, where he picked up Hudson's detachment, which brought up his strength to 2,000 infantry and six guns. Here also he was joined by Major Green, who had just arrived from Sherpur with two squadrons of the 12th Bengal Cavalry. Officers, men,

and horses, however, were quite worn out, having had a long and terrible night march. Green, with his two squadrons, had been put outside the walls of Sherpur the previous evening—the weather being bitterly cold and the ground covered with snow—with orders to make the best of his way to Butkhak, about twenty miles south of cantonments. In the darkness of a December night, the little party had great difficulty in getting across the Logar River, where they were fired upon by an enemy's picket. They missed the ford, and in trying to climb the opposite bank, which was steep and slippery, some of the men fell back into the icy cold water, and were drenched to the skin. At Butkhak they were again attacked, and to escape total destruction had to strike across country. Luckily, one of the native officers, an Afghan himself, knew the region well and guided them in safety, by a mountain track, to Latabund.

At Budkhak Gough heliographed to Roberts to say he would advance to the Logar bridge;

but, although his heliogram was acknowledged, no reply came, for at that instant heavy clouds arising blotted out the sun. About one o'clock Gough's advanced guard occupied the bridge; but as it was not till long after sunset that his rear guard arrived, and no orders were received from Sherpur, he continued to hold that position during the night, in ignorance of the fact that early on the morning of that same day, the 23rd, Mahomed Jan, influenced no doubt by the news of the near approach of Gough's relieving force, had made a determined attack on the Sherpur cantonments. Repulsed at all points, about one o'clock he withdrew his discomfited troops out of action. Some of the tribesmen left Kabul at once, but large numbers occupied the city till after nightfall, when they too dispersed so completely, that by sunrise on the 24th, not a single man of that vast gathering was within miles of its walls.

I have dwelt on this episode of Sir Charles Gough's relief of Sherpur, because the story and

its sequel bring out two very marked traits in Lord Roberts' character — his unscrupulousness where he has an end of his own to serve, and his lack of gratitude towards those to whom he is most deeply indebted. Was it justifiable to send to an officer, whom he knew to be weak in troops and still weaker in transport, an imperative order to advance, at the same time deceiving him as to the strength and position of the Afghans ; for what was it but a deception to give Gough the assurance that there was no enemy in his road, whilst he, Roberts, knew well that Mahomed Jan's army, numbering at the lowest computation 60,000 men, lay between the relieving force and Sherpur ? The fact that Gough was not attacked, in no way diminishes the great wrong done to him by Roberts' misleading message. At the time it was sent, the Afghans held a position from which, without relaxing their hold on the garrison of Sherpur, they could have thrown against Gough's 2,000 men a force large enough to overwhelm and annihilate it. That

they did not do so, was due not to any help rendered by General Roberts—for, despite the latter's promises of aid, not a man was sent out to meet the former, except Green's two squadrons of cavalry, which really added nothing to his strength—but to want of generalship in the Afghan commander, or, more probably, to lack of discipline among his wild and self-willed hordes.

I am quite aware that the lay-reader, judging only by the result, will be more inclined to praise Roberts for foresight than to blame him for his want of candour; but military men will certainly agree with me that, to an officer in Gough's case, the truth, and nothing but the truth, was due. A man of well-known courage and enterprise, there was no fear that he would shirk the task laid upon him, on account of its magnitude, if he saw the least chance of being able to perform it; and to deceive him as to the resistance he might expect to encounter, was to run the risk of inspiring him with that undue

confidence which had led Roberts himself, through neglect, to disaster. Fortunately Gough was as cautious as he was brave, and made his advance with exactly the same care as if Roberts' heliogram had never been received ; but had the respective positions of these two officers been reversed, should we have been able to say the same ?

And how was the man, who ran so great a risk at General Roberts' bidding, rewarded for the great service that he had rendered to him and his beleaguered troops—for it was entirely due to his approach that the Afghans abandoned the siege of Sherpur ? Sir Frederick Roberts' original despatch, giving an account of the events I have just been narrating, mentions the fact of Gough's arrival at Sherpur without the addition of one word of acknowledgment or praise. In a subsequent despatch, he does, indeed, just admit that thanks are due to Charles Gough ; but that general's own account of his exploit was re-written before being submitted to the Com-

mander-in-Chief, and the only thing that he seems to have gained by his heroic conduct was the pleasure of being called to account by Government for the loss of sundry tents and broken-down Deccan ponies which he abandoned in his rapid advance.

I come now to the events on which Lord Roberts' reputation really rests—the march to Kandahar and the victory which crowned it.

General Stewart, with his division, had arrived at Kabul in April, 1879, and assumed command of all the troops in Northern Afghanistan. In August news reached him of the disaster at Maiwand and the investment of Kandahar, and he at once equipped a magnificent force of 10,000 fighting men and 18 mountain guns for the relief of that city, and put Sir Frederick Roberts at its head.

I have no wish to depreciate Lord Roberts' one great achievement. The advance on Kandahar was a splendid soldiers' march, fully testing the endurance and spirit of the veteran troops

who took part in it; and the battle of Kandahar was the battle of a good tactician, since, for once, General Roberts kept his troops well in hand, every division, brigade and regiment mutually supporting each other; but the circumstances of both march and battle require to be known and weighed before its true value can be assigned to either. As regards the former, I will not say a word of my own, but simply transcribe a passage dealing with it from a lecture by Captain C. Hoskins, R.E. :—

“ He (Roberts) had admirable transport. His chief of the Staff, Lieut.-Colonel Chapman, R.A., knew the road intimately, as he had just marched up with General Stewart. The time of the year was also propitious, as the harvest had lately been gathered in, and supplies were ample on the road. . . . General Roberts had not a wheel in his division, and left Kabul without a single camel. . . . General Stewart, on the contrary, left Kandahar for Ghuzni with a heavy

battery, one battery Horse Artillery, one battery Field Artillery, the road having to be repaired on the way for artillery. The country was more or less unknown to him. He had camel-carriage, elephants, and bullocks; for some sixty miles the villages were absolutely deserted, and the difficulties of getting supplies great. He fought a general action at Ahmed Kheyl, and on the 20th day from Kandahar, took Ghuzni. I would ask military critics in what particulars the march from Kabul to Kandahar was *per se* a more brilliant operation than that of General Stewart's to Ghuzni? It is easy to understand why the British public think so. The General Election absorbed public attention during General Stewart's march. General Roberts was more fortunate; he had the eyes of the world turned upon him. The disasters of Maiwand and the siege of Kandahar had tarnished the honour of the British flag, and the rapid and completely successful way in which the stain was wiped off

on the 1st September was received with acclamation by the whole British nation."

As regards the battle, though, as I have said, well planned and well fought, there could be no doubt as to its result. Where over 12,000 British troops, of whom nearly one-third are Englishmen,¹ are pitted against 12,800 Afghans, or any other Asiatics, victory must and will remain with the former.

It is fair to Lord Roberts to say that, under the discipline of experience to which he was subjected at Kabul, he showed himself as quick to learn in questions of policy as in matters of war. Just as at Kandahar he avoided all the mistakes which hitherto had made his tactics more dangerous to his friends than to his foes, so when called upon in the spring of 1880 to advise the Indian Government with regard to the future of Afghanistan, he displayed a grasp

¹ These figures do not include the Bombay troops garrisoning Kandahar.

of the situation, as between ourselves and that country on the one hand, and ourselves and Russia on the other, and an appreciation of its strong as well as of its weak points, which must have been a surprise to the Viceroy who had listened in former days to very different language from his lips. Weary of barren strife and of equally barren victories, convinced by the testimony of his own eyes that Eastern Afghanistan was a prize which no nation need covet, and its inhabitants a wild, fiercely independent people, who might be beaten, but could not be tamed, Roberts pronounced boldly for a speedy retirement to our original frontier both in the Kuram and on the Khyber side, and for a complete abandonment of the "forward" policy so far as these two routes were concerned, and he supported his advice by reasons of which Lawrence himself might have been proud.

In an elaborate report, addressed to the Viceroy and Governor-General, and dated Kabul, May 29, 1890, after entreating his Excellency

“to bear in mind that no one has been a more zealous supporter of the present policy, and that no one has more strongly advocated an unsparing reduction of the military power of Afghanistan, than I have”; and after confessing that he had come to the conclusion “*that the less the Afghans see of us, the less they will dislike us,*” and that “if we cannot settle matters with the Afghans at this season of the year, when everything is in our favour, we shall certainly not be able to do so in winter, when the difficulties of our occupation are immeasurably increased,” he went on to advocate a withdrawal of our troops within our original frontier, and to give two reasons for the suggestion—the one that it would be impolitic to require our native troops to remain away from their own country any longer; the other that “*should Russia in future years attempt to conquer Afghanistan or invade India through it, we should have a better chance of attaching the Afghans to our interests if we avoid all interference with them in the meantime.*”

Sir F. Roberts' recommendations did not cease here. He who in 1895 finds it impossible to comprehend how "any one conversant with our position in India can arrive at any other conclusion than that Chitral"—an insignificant little town 185 miles from Peshawur, and a thousand miles from any place which can be regarded as the possible base of Russian operations against India—"is of great strategical importance," boldly pressed upon the Indian Government in 1880, the abandonment of Jumrood, the strong position which gives us the command of the Khyber—the reduction of the garrison of Peshawur "to the lowest possible strength," and "withdrawing all, or nearly all, the European troops" to healthier situations on the left bank of the Indus; and this not only to ensure "a serviceable force, fit to take the field at any time of the year," but because "the longer and more difficult the line of communication is, the more numerous and greater the obstacles which Russia would have to overcome, and, *so far from shortening one*

mile of the road, I would let the webs of difficulties extend to the very mouth of the Khyber Pass."

Had the salutary impression made upon Sir F. Roberts by the events which marked his short tenure of supreme power at Kabul, proved as lasting as, for the moment, they were deep, this study of an episode in Lord Roberts' career would never have been written, for he would to-day be straining every nerve to prevent his countrymen from committing, on a large scale, the blunders of which, within a restricted area, he himself had once reaped the bitter fruits. When, precisely, his views began to return into what, I think, I may call their natural channel, I am unable to say; but by 1885, when he succeeded Sir D. Stewart, as Commander-in-Chief in India, he had gone back to the standpoint and to the convictions of Lord Lytton and Sir Peter Lumsden, and had well-nigh forgotten that he had ever looked at India's frontier policy with the eyes of a Lawrence

or a Mansfield. From that time to this, he has been the chief instrument in decreasing "the web of difficulties" spread by nature herself in the way of a Russian advance, and the main cause of those financial troubles which are slowly undermining our hold upon the good-will of the Indian peoples.

His administrative record as Commander-in-Chief reflects the story of his conduct, in the Kuram and Kabul campaigns, with all the difference which lies between the possibilities of evil open to the commander of a few thousand men, and those enjoyed by the head of India's military forces.

In every direction he pushed troops far up into the hills, scattering them over an enormous area in small isolated bodies. At this moment there is hardly a post, throughout the sixty or seventy thousand square miles which he has added to the British Empire, which is strong enough to hold its own, were the danger to

avert which it was established, really to arise, and scarcely two that could give support to each other in the hour of need. Lord Roberts has smoothed Russia's path into India, supposing her to wish to tread it, literally, by constructing roads where the absence of roads was India's best security, and, metaphorically, by making enemies of numberless tribes who now, on occasion given, will turn to *her* for deliverance ; as, had we left them undisturbed and *she* had been the invader, they would have turned to *us* for assistance. His personal reign in India is over, but his spirit still rules her destinies, and his hand points the way to the Hindu Kush. Shall we go whither he bids us, or resolutely turn our backs upon his promised land of security and prosperity—the actual bog of difficulty and desert of deficits, desert large enough and dry enough to swallow up all the streams of India's wealth, however lavishly she may pour them forth—and return to a policy of sober, dutiful

attention to the needs and aspirations of the 280,000,000 inhabitants of administrative India, in whose contentment lies our strength, and in whose alienation we shall find our ruin?

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